Democracy for Some: The Civic Opportunity Gap

CERG’s 2005-2007 study found that access to civic learning opportunities was inequitable. Wealthy, white, and academically successful students had more access to the effective civic learning opportunities that best prepare young people to be effective, engaged citizens. Low-income students, students of color, and young people not planning to attend college had access to fewer of these effective civic learning opportunities.

Effective Civic Learning Opportunities

✦ Discuss Current Events
✦ Study Issues of Concern to Students
✦ Classroom Discussions of Social & Political Issues
✦ Study Government, History, Social Sciences
✦ Interact with Civic Role Models
✦ Extracurricular Activities
✦ Learning about Community Problems & Strategies to Respond
✦ Service Learning Projects
✦ Simulations of Government Processes

These opportunities are strongly related to such civic outcomes as commitment to voting, engagement in politics, and volunteering.

More Access
Students in higher income classrooms versus students in average income classrooms were:

- 2x more likely to report studying how laws are made
- 2x more likely to report participating in service learning projects
- 1 1/2x more likely to report participating in simulations of government processes
- 80% more likely to participate in political discussions and debates

Less Access
African American students were less likely than white students:

- to have government classes that taught them to stay informed and how to act on political issues that affected them
- to be in classrooms where they could freely express their opinions

Latino students had fewer opportunities:

- to do service learning projects integrated into classroom work
- to participate in simulations of government processes

Closing the Civic Opportunity Gap

1. In order to close the gap schools first have to know where they are. Collecting data on access to existing civic learning opportunities is a critical first step.
2. Social Studies, History, and Civics teachers need tools. Targeted professional development could support integration of effective civic learning opportunities into their classes.
3. Schools and districts need new initiatives that expand access to class and extracurricular civic learning opportunities to all students, not just those already inclined to participate.
4. Assessment of civic learning expansion strategies by collecting data on the students that are and aren’t being reached is critical to sustained civic learning equity.

Full Citation:

For more on The Civic Opportunity Gap go to www.civicsurvey.org